

Public Value Privatized?

The Need for a Continuous Emphasis on How to Actualize the Public Interest

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Barry Bozeman, Public Values and Public Interest. Counterbalancing Economic Individualism. (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2007) 224 pp. ISBN: 9781589011779. \$29.95

Public values are one of the most widely and fiercely discussed topics within contemporary public administration. The few empirical research questions that are actually addressed within these discussions concern what public values exactly are and which specific values are the most important (Beck Jørgensen and Bozeman, 2007), what constitutes the ‘publicness’ of specific values (Van der Wal, De Graaf & Lasthuizen, 2008), and how public values can be safeguarded (de Bruijn and Dicke, 2006) and reconciled (Kernaghan, 2000) in an era of privatizing and ‘managing government like a business’.

At the core of the debate on public values, however, is a much more fundamental normative, or rather ideological, argument: The values that should characterize government conduct should be values that are based on the notion of the public interest and the common good, and not those based on economic individualism and a market-like approach to government (cf. Frederickson 2005). So far nonetheless, not many authors have succeeded in making a strong empirical or theoretical case underpinning this argument. With *Public Values and public interest. Counterbalancing Economic Individualism*, Barry Bozeman (University of Georgia), one of the world’s leading public management scholars, provides such a thorough and thoughtful plea for the need of a continuous emphasis on what is public about government conduct and why, and is as such the first in its kind.

Public Values and Public Interest contains ten chapters in which the concept of public values and its relation with the public interest are addressed and approached from a more fundamental historical-theoretical as well as an empirical-political angle, each supported by rich case studies and examples out of the daily life within public institutions. The intention of the book, however, is to be normative and prescriptive rather than empirical. As chapter 1 (7) notes, “this book seeks to provide a “counterbalance” to both the philosophical and the more practical aspects of economic individualism. The practical prescription, “Managing Publicness,” provided in the concluding chapter, is an alternative to privatization and New Public Management. Managing Publicness takes public values as its starting point and public interest ideals as its objective.” In the same chapter the book’s literal objective is presented: “to address the imbalance of theoretical bases between, respectively, market-based and public values approaches to policy and management (18).”

What I find particularly refreshing about the author’s approach is that he does not automatically dismiss the relevance of economic approaches to public policy and public management, as is done so easily by many others in the field, but rather provides well structured arguments for balancing the different pillars on which governments are built, including *both* public values and public interest, *and* economic individualism. Bozeman’s subtitle, “*counterbalancing* economic individualism does not imply that (...) economic individualism [is] wrong, harmful or of little practical use” (22). This is contrary to the premise ‘the market is the root of all evil’ that dominates many recent studies on values and ethics in the public sphere. Thus, the book is more nuanced but also more realistic than many others in the field. It does, however, reiterate the notion of ‘public value failure’ (e.g., Feeney and Bozeman 2007) that appears in cases where public values are not met (enough) by certain public policies due to an *overemphasis* on economic individualism.

Given the objective of the book, addressing the imbalance between economic individualism and public interest theory, to what extent has it succeeded in its mission? In view of its title, it may seem surprising at first that a large portion of the book is dedicated to a careful expose of economic theory and a description of the underpinnings and premises of the notion of economic individualism (chapters two, three and four). However, the extensive emphasis on economic theory as compared to the attention to public interest theory (chapters five and six) might just prove the author's point that a fundamental imbalance between the two does exist in the literature. These five chapters, which are at the core of the book, are made up of an extensive mixture of political and moral philosophy and economic theory, illustrated with modern day cases and examples out of the public and private domain.

Chapter 7 provides an extensive expose on how value and values can be defined, and related to collective action. Although values are “essentially contested concepts” (Gallie 1955: 169) and will remain to be so after this book, Bozeman at least presents a coherent conceptualization, something that many scholars who study values do not. Chapters 8 and 9 focus primarily on the concept of public value mapping (PVM). A PVM grid is introduced as “a tool for analyzing normative publicness” (156) and applied to a specific case – that of genetically modified foods and the terminator gene. The concept of public value mapping, albeit a work in progress as the author is first to admit, provides a concrete framework for making transparent the successes and failures in actualizing public values in specific decision-making and policy processes and is as such the first in its kind, at least in terms of applicability and transferability to different cases.

The concluding chapter, rather than just summarizing the nine preceding chapters, presents “Managing Publicness” as an alternative concept vis-a-vis NPM-based public management frameworks; a sector-neutral and pragmatic yet public value-infused approach to concrete public management action as well as broader governance. By presenting this

framework a provocative, original and impressively rich underpinned counterbalance is offered to the ideas of economic individualism, and thus the book has definitely succeeded in its mission.

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